

## A DISCOURSE APPROACH TO POLISH CLITIC PLACEMENT

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**Abstract:** The unmarked position of the Polish pronominal clitics, particularly reflexive *się*, is immediately after the verb. If *się* is not attached to the verb, it is attracted to a prosodically more prominent and pragmatically more salient word, which constitutes the focus of information. If the verb is focalised, the unmarked order imposes itself *a fortiori*. Postverbal position often coincides with topic prominence. Initial topics are prosodically marked off by a potential pause, which lends support to the hypothesis that Polish clitics were originally second-position clitics of the Wackernagel type.

**Keywords:** clitics, Polish, topic prominence, Wackernagel's Law

### 1. INTRODUCTION

“[T]he Polish clitic system poses very special problems for a general theory of clitics”. With these words, Spencer (1991: 375) concludes his case study from Polish with which he preambles the chapter on clitics of his introduction to generative morphology. He also, and justly, remarks (1991: 351) that Polish does not figure prominently in the theoretical literature on clitics. Where it does, attention is generally focused on the question whether

or not the syntax of the Polish clitics is sensitive to their phonological properties and the perspective taken is either syntactic or phonological. The present paper approaches the problem of Polish clitic placement from a discourse perspective, with particular reference to the placement of pronominal clitics.

## 2. PREVIOUS ACCOUNTS

Syntactic statements on Polish clitic placement generally include the following: (1) Polish clitics cannot start a clause, (2) they do not normally end a clause of more than two words, (3) they are placed either immediately after or someplace before the verb. Phonologically, the Polish clitics are normally *enclitic*, i.e. they attach to the preceding rather than the following word, which is why they can never start a clause. The following examples, from De Bray (1980: 326), illustrate the restrictions on pronominal clitic placement:

- (1a) *spotykam go*  
I-meet him  
“I meet him”
- (1b) *często go spotykam*  
often him I-meet  
“I often meet him”
- (1c) *teraz go często spotykam*  
nowadays him often I-meet  
“I often meet him now”
- (1d) *teraz często go spotykam*  
nowadays often him I-meet  
“I often meet him now”

In the present paper, we will be concerned with the second and third constraints mentioned above and exemplified with examples (1b) through (1d). We will take as our point of departure the following remark from De Bray (1980: 326-327) apropos of (1c) and (1d): “If two adverbs or adverbial expressions occur, the enclitic personal pronoun, which prefers to come early in the sentence, may be put after the first, especially colloquially, or after the second (which ordinarily also precedes the verb). [...] But the verb itself may be more stressed than some of the adverbs, and so occur towards the beginning of a sentence. Then the enclitic pronoun occurs as third, and not second, word in the sentence”. The following example is quoted:

- (1e) *często spotykam go w mieście*  
often I-meet him in town  
“I often meet him in town”

De Bray (1980: 327) makes a further distinction between the personal clitic pronouns and the reflexive *się* which “usually follows the verb with which it goes”, but he maintains that “it too avoids the final position colloquially” (*ibid.*). In the remainder of this paper, we will present some results of a corpus-based analysis of the placement of the clitic pronouns in the plays of Sławomir Mrożek collected in *Wybór dramatów i opowiadań*, which are representative of colloquial Polish.

### 3. A DISCOURSE APPROACH

Since the unmarked position for the reflexive clitic pronoun *się* is immediately after its verb, we assume that this is the unmarked order for the other clitic pronouns as well. Firstly, because it is the only possible order in minimal sentences of the (1a) type. Secondly, because postverbal placement may be considered the natural order, since the phonological dependence of the clitics matches their syntactic dependence in this particular case. Thirdly, because the clitics do not stand later than immediately after their verb. Since the clitics may appear in any position before their verb, except of course clause-initially, we assume that they have a special relationship either with the verb, if they are in postverbal position, or with the word they attach to, if they are in preverbal position. In view of the special bond between the clitic pronoun *go* and the stressed verb *spotykam* in (1e), we further hypothesize that if the clitics are not attached to their verb, they are attracted to a prosodically more prominent and pragmatically more salient word which is the focus of attention of the utterance. Thus, in (1b) and (1d) *często* is the focus of attention which has attracted *go*, whereas in (1c) it is *teraz*. The same applies, all other things being equal, to the following example:

- (2a) *czuję się ... odpowiedzialny* (M15)  
I-feel refl responsible  
"I feel responsible"
- (2b) *źle się czuje* (M15)  
badly refl feels  
"it feels *uncomfortable*"

Compare also the following examples, where (3a) represents the marked order:

- (3a) *zgadza się pan?* (M18)  
he-agrees refl you.honorific  
"you *agree*, sir?"
- (3b) *pan się zgodzi?* (M26)  
you.honorific refl he-will-agree  
"you *agree*, sir?"

The preference of clitic pronouns "to come early in the sentence", as De Bray put it, is in fact a "remnant" (Spencer 1991: 369) of Wackernagel's Law according to which clitics were placed after the first stressed word or constituent of the clause in Proto-Indo-European (Wackernagel 1892). In his article on the Slavic clitics, Roman Jakobson (1935: 384) asserted that Common Slavic inherited Wackernagel's Law which in turn passed down to the modern Slavic languages. Judging from examples (1b), (1c), (2b) and (3b), Polish has indeed retained remnants of Wackernagel's Law, but two questions remain to be answered. Firstly, what are the conditions under which Wackernagel's Law is triggered off? Secondly, how can the apparent counterexamples (1d) and (1e) be accounted for?

The first question has already been answered in part. Wackernagel's Law is triggered off by the presence of a prosodically prominent and pragmatically salient clause-initial word or constituent which attracts the clitics in clause-second position. The adverbs *często* (1b), *teraz* (1c) and *źle* (3b) are all focused, as are the initial constituents in the following examples:

- (4) *słabsze organizmy się łamią* (M10)  
weaker organisms refl they-break  
“weaker organisms break down”
- (5) *noc się zbliża* (M20)  
night refl it-comes near  
“night is falling”
- (6) *niczego mi nie udowodnicie* (M12)  
nothing to-me not you-will-prove  
“you won’t have *nothing* against me”
- (7) *może się pan uniesie?* (M22)  
perhaps refl you.honorific you-will-stand-up  
“perhaps you will stand up, sir?”

The second question can be answered if we assume that Wackernagel's Law is a prosodic phenomenon which has to be defined in terms of intonation units rather than clauses (Janse 1993: 22). From this point of view, the clitic pronoun *go* would still be in second position in (1d) and (1e), the adverbs *teraz* (1d) and *często* (1e) constituting separate intonation units “setting the stage” for what follows. Other examples include the following:

- (8) *w pańskiej łazience / zagnieździł się dorosły tygrys* (M11)  
in your bathroom he-lodged refl adult tiger  
“in your bathroom (there) lodged an adult tiger”
- (9) *w pewnym sensie / ocalił mi pan życie* (M14)  
in certain sense saving me you life  
“in a way, you have saved my life”

#### 4. CLITIC PLACEMENT AND TOPIC PROMINENCE

This leads us to another observation. It is generally agreed that Polish is a topic prominent language (Kraska-Szlenk 1993: 273). Topics are often realized as left-dislocated constituents, i.e. as separate intonation units. The data we have examined contains a large number of cases where postverbal position coincides with topic prominence:

- (10) *jeden myśliwy / rozbiera się* (M16)  
one hunter he-undresses refl  
“one hunter (he) gets undressed”
- (11) *rozwścieczony tygrys / pojawia się nagle* (M16)  
furious tiger he-appears refl suddenly  
“the furious tiger (he) suddenly appears”
- (12) *zewnętrzność i wewnętrzność / pozór i głębina / złożą się na aurę naszego przedsięwzięcia* (M17)  
exterior and interior appearance and depth they-will-contribute refl to aura of-our of-enterprise  
“the exterior and interior, the appearance and depth will contribute to the aura of our enterprise”

- (13) *Ohey / kąpie się w niasidówe* (M25)  
 Ohey he-bathes refl in hipbath  
 "Ohey (he) is taking a hipbath"

In the case of example (12), the intonation unit boundary between the complex topic *zewnętrznosc i wewnętrznosc / pozór i głębia* is graphically represented by a dash in the printed text. We hypothesize that the subjects in SV=*się* utterances were originally left-dislocated topics separated from the rest of the utterance by a potential pause. Grammaticalization of this sentence type, together with the minimal sentence type (1a) may have resulted in the fact that V=*się* has become the unmarked order, even without a potential pause between S and V=*się*. In the following examples, on the other hand, the clitic pronouns are attracted to a focused adverb which is preceded by a left-dislocated topic:

- (14) *widzę że kolega / już się niecierpliwi* (M12)  
 I-see that colleague already refl he-is-impatient  
 "I see that my colleague (he) is getting *already* impatient"
- (15) *Te sprawy / ściśle się wiążą* (M12)  
 those matters closely refl they-connect  
 "those matters (they) are *closely* related"

## 5. CONCLUSION

The behaviour of the Polish clitic pronouns as it emerges from the preceding examples, parallels the behaviour of clitic pronouns in other Indo-European languages, particularly in Ancient Greek and Latin and the easternmost modern Greek and westernmost modern Romance dialects (Janse, Forthcoming). As in the modern Greek and Romance dialects, the Polish clitic pronouns, whether pre- or postverbal, tend to be systematically associated with the verb. This would explain the fact that preverbal clitic pronouns are sometimes treated as *proclitic* on the verb instead of *enclitic* on the preceding constituent, as in the westernmost modern Romance dialects. Consider, for instance, the following extract from a conversation reported by Rappaport (1989: 321) who, it should be noted, emphasizes the optionality of the phenomenon:

- (16) *w instytucie / się nie zgodzą*  
 at the institute refl not they-agree  
 "at the institute they won't agree to it"

Similar cases are also discussed by Kraska-Szlenk, who adds to the confusion by first asserting that the position of preverbal clitic pronouns cannot be determined with reference to intonation unit boundaries (1993: 268), but goes on to state that "clitics may not occur after an intonational break ..., including the sentence initial position" (1993: 269). The occasional procliticization of clitic pronouns may be interpreted as a sign of ongoing morphologization which could eventually lead to what Jakobson (1971: 384) called "univerbation", i.e. affixation. This is what has happened in standard modern Greek and most of the modern Romance dialects such as Spanish, French and Italian, where preverbal clitic pronouns are also proclitic on the (finite) verb and can even occur in sentence-initial position. We maintain, however, that preverbal placement of the clitic pronouns in Polish can only be properly understood in relation to focused (preverbal) constituents. On the basis of the available evidence, we conclude that Polish is essentially a Wackernagel-type language.

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